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Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion

Review by: Sarah Gilligan

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Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion

Exhibition: May 27, 2017–February 18, 2018, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK

Reviewed by Sarah Gilligan

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The year 2017 marks the centenary of the opening of renowned Spanish “dressmaker, tailor, fashion designer, and couturier” Cristóbal Balenciaga’s inaugural dressmaking business in San Sebastian in northern Spain and the eightieth anniversary of the opening of what was to become the most expensive and exclusive couture establishment in Paris: The House of Balenciaga at 10 Avenue George V.¹ The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London is celebrating these anniversaries with the first-ever UK retrospective exhibition of Balenciaga’s work (curated by Cassie Davies-Strodder), together with the publication of a revised and expanded illustrated hardcover book by Lesley Ellis Miller.² The small-scale exhibition, sponsored by American Express, is on display in the circular temporary exhibition space that forms the central area and the upper level of the V&A’s recently renovated room 40 (The Fashion Gallery). The exhibits displayed on the ground-floor space focus on the latter part of Balenciaga’s career, with womenswear garments drawn predominantly from the 1950s and 1960s that were acquired in the 1970s for the V&A’s collection by Balenciaga’s friend Cecil Beaton. The upper level maximizes the exhibition’s appeal to a broad audience by bringing the exhibition up to the moment and exploring Balenciaga’s enduring influence on contemporary international fashion design.

Balenciaga is famed for his “resolutely modern approach to couture” by creating theatrical garments with an architectural quality.³ His iconic designs from the 1950s and 1960s offered new dramatic silhouettes that relinquished the focus on the bust, waist, and hips (as seen in Christian Dior’s New Look) in favor of innovative cutting that skimmed the body.⁴ Balloon-cuffed sleeves, the sack dress (1957), La Tulipe dress (1965), the one-piece cape (1967), and

the elaborate trapezoid winged “envelope” cocktail dress (1967) have become some of Balenciaga’s most iconic garments. Through his sculptural emphasis on line, form, and movement, Balenciaga created shapes around the body that were “so voluminous they obscured the body’s outlines entirely.”⁵ Although attention is shifted away from the body’s shape through a focus on form and volume, this is not to say that his garments are not feminine or erotic. With simple lines, bold sleeves, and collars cut to stand away from the neck, Balenciaga displaces desire onto the shoulders, nape, and pelvis, creating a look that Josep Font of Delpozoz argues appears “almost Oriental” to Western audiences.⁶ Rather than starting with a sketch and then seeking out appropriate materials, Balenciaga began his design process by working with lace, silk gazar, and chiffon fabrics from Swiss, Italian, and UK manufacturers (such as Brivet, Abraham, and Ascher Textiles) and then designing and producing garments around the specific qualities of the fabrics.⁷ Through his manipulation of contrasting fabrics informing the end result, Balenciaga elevated the idea of simplicity within luxury.⁸ Although Balenciaga “reigned supreme at the zenith of haute couture,” he “preferred to focus the purity of his vision on the bespoke” for his exclusive, wealthy clients rather than influencing current trends by developing a ready-to-wear line for the masses.⁹ Versions of his more conservative designs could, however, be bought in Spain in one of his Eisa stores, at half the price of his exclusive Parisian couture garments.¹⁰

The V&A’s exhibition opens by clearly demonstrating the evolution of Balenciaga’s distinct coutural style through displaying examples from the 1940s that contrast with an adjacent case displaying a striking green silk gazar balloon dress and cape from 1961 that showcases the sculptural qualities of Balenciaga’s work. In Balenciaga’s garments from the 1940s, his debt to Spanish culture is evident through references to flamenco style, the short jackets worn by bullfighters (chaquetillas), embroidered manila shawls, and the mantillas with their black lace contrasting against pale fabric underneath.¹¹ The garments are further contextualized with examples of a cover from *Harper’s Bazaar* photographed by Richard Avedon (December 1949) and a bullfighting poster. This pattern of displaying garments on mannequins juxtaposed with archive books, photographs, magazines, sketches, and fabric samples is evident throughout the cases on the lower floor and provides a welcome historical contextualization of the development and promotion of Balenciaga’s work.

In order to confront and overcome the significant curatorial challenges of displaying clothes on static mannequins, the exhibition attempts to bring the clothes and the design process to life by offering a selection of particularly interesting insights through animated patterns, short films on the couture garment-making process, and replica toiles (produced by pattern-making

students at the London College of Fashion). These additional resources primarily center on the three display cases featuring a dusky pink La Tulipe dress (1965), a black evening dress and cape (1967), and a spectacular red silk taffeta balloon hem evening dress (1954). In contrast to the black backdrops and spotlighting of many of the other cases, these three examples are showcased on rotating mannequins against white backdrop, with diffused lighting to the rear. The ability to see the complete garment enables the layers, drape, volume, and surface qualities of the fabric to be showcased, revealing the shifting silhouette of the garments from different angles.

What is even more interesting about these three cases is the display of selected outcomes from the collaboration between the V&A and British photographer and X-ray artist Nick Veasey. Bringing science, art, and curation together in new and exciting ways, the X-rays, as Veasey argues, enable us to “see fashion in a way it’s never been seen before.”¹² In order to document examples from the collection, Veasey constructed a mobile X-ray unit within a truck. The garments were thus able to remain within the confines of the museum while the team overcame the challenges of how to convey a sense of volume and drape without a material body or mannequin within the garments. Through weighted fishing wires and balloons, the garments are given shape, and in turn the final X-rays reveal the beautiful and highly intricate structures’ boning and shaping that otherwise would remain hidden within the layers of fabric.¹³

This insight into the details underpinning Balenciaga’s work is evident in a number of other examples. In particular, a silk garbardine and silk chiffon evening dress from 1963 is displayed inside out in order to reveal the attention to detail involved in constructing a couture gown. A steel-boned bodice tailored to the measurements of the client has its fabric edges bound in silk tulle and its fastenings carefully covered in velvet to make it more comfortable against the skin. Such details are also evident in the examples of embroidery and beading by Lesage. For example, the graduated pink evening coat (1967) with pearls and teardrop- and feather-shaped sequins topped with Swarovski crystals creates a shimmering effect that makes it look as if it is made from the spectacular fur of one of Jim Henson’s characters from *The Muppets*. The examples in the later cases draw attention to the diversity of Balenciaga’s work, with several of the Eisa and the haute couture garments offering a significant contrast to the sculptural simplicity of the pieces in the earlier cases.

The opportunity for visitors to see diverse, spectacular, and exquisite couture and pret-a-porter pieces extends to the upper level with the five themed sections: new materials, perfectionism, shape and volume, innovation and pattern cutting, and minimalism. Across the displays, examples of work by Gareth Pugh, Nicolas Ghesquiere, Iris van Herpen, Oscar de la Renta,

Yves Saint Laurent, Hussein Chalayan, Yohji Yamamoto, and Issey Miyake (among others) provide the public—and particularly fashion students—with the opportunity to get up close to works by iconic international designers that they may otherwise have only seen in books, magazines, or online. Of particular interest and popularity among visitors was Rei Kawakubo's spectacular dusky pink cotton and polyurethane leather dress and cape from 2016. The upper level benefited from two of the display areas (innovation and pattern cutting and shape and volume) having garments on plinths devoid of cases. Although the pleasures and sensorial knowledge gained through textile tactility are still unfortunately denied, the absence of the glass creates an increased sense of intimacy between the visitor and the garment, allowing the viewer to survey the display in more detail and avoid the visual and photographic challenges of light bouncing against glass cabinets.

Although curation of any kind demands a delicate balance to be achieved between display and conservation, the containment of garments and archival artifacts within glass cases remains problematic, particularly for fashion exhibitions. The creative scope for display felt constrained by the space, and this was further exacerbated on the ground floor by the volume of visitors coupled with the summer heat and humidity. In bringing the clothes to life, it would have been beneficial to see more examples either on rotating mannequins or displayed with mirrors so that all angles of the garment could be seen. On the upper floor, there were large-scale photographic images on the ends of cases, and it would have been interesting to see this replicated on the lower floor, with larger reproductions of sketches and photographs to complement the original archival objects. There remains a tendency at the V&A (together with other museums and galleries) to provide contextual written information and A5/A4-sized images at knee/ thigh height on small stands. On a busy day, this makes it very challenging for visitors to see the supporting information, let alone for those with any level of visual impairment. For visitors interested in the design process (and/or those with visual impairments), placing original artifacts at the rear of the glass cases reduces the capacity to fully survey, understand, and interpret the materials on display. In an exhibition such as this, the revealing of details of the design process and couture production was instrumental to developing the visitors' knowledge, and one wishes (particularly with the financial support of a major sponsor) that more archival images had been reproduced and displayed on a much larger scale.

In contrast, the upper level benefited from having more space both between each of the cases and in terms of the ceiling height of the Octagon Court, creating a much more pleasant visitor experience. Large video screens displayed the interviews with Gareth Pugh and Josep Font,

and the outer circular walls were adorned in quotes about the impact of Balenciaga's work on other designers. At the center was a visually stunning, morphed animation tracing the connections between Balenciaga's work and examples of contemporary design. The exhibition would have had more cohesion between the levels had this strategy been extended to the placement of the exhibits themselves. For example, there were very obvious connections to be made between Balenciaga's envelope dress from 1967 and Corrie Neilson's 2013 dress; between the Balenciaga cape and both Issey Miyake's one-piece-of-cloth designs and Spanish-based designer Sybilla's black cape; and between Balenciaga's 1961 green balloon dress and cape and Sybilla's 1987 version. Additionally, comparisons could have been drawn between Josep Font's 2017 sequinned bolero and Balenciaga's bullfighter-inspired early work, together with the surface details of the embroidered 2015 diaphanous flowery gown by Oscar de la Renta, Yves Saint Laurent's 1967 black-feathered dress, and the embroidery work by Lesage for Balenciaga. By displaying such garments next to one another, the visual connections between past and present and the claims for Balenciaga's enduring legacy would have been strengthened for all visitors.

Overall, *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion*, with one hundred garments and twenty hats on display, offers fashion students, scholars, and the general public a valuable opportunity to see a diverse range of both Balenciaga's and international fashion designers' work on display in the UK. When combined with the stunning X-ray images from Nick Veasey and the range of innovative audio-visual materials (which are also currently available online), the exhibition provides a small-scale (but detailed) informative and engaging experience for visitors interested in fashion history.

Contributor details

Sarah Gilligan teaches art, design, and contextual studies (HE and FE) at Hartlepool College (UK). Her research, publications, and collaborative creative projects focus on costume, fashion, and identities in contemporary visual culture.

Notes

1. Lesley Ellis Miller, *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion* (London: V&A Publishing, 2017), 10, 20.
2. Miller, *Balenciaga*, 14.
3. Marnie Fogg, *Fashion: The Whole Story* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), 300.

4. Ibid.
5. Bradley Quinn, *The Fashion of Architecture* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 83.
6. Victoria and Albert Museum, Josep Font, Delpozo: Inspired by Balenciaga (London: Culture Shock Media, 2017). Video on display at Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion, accessed August 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRcEcQMUZ-k>.
7. Victoria and Albert Museum, Exhibition Panel Notes for Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion.
8. Victoria and Albert Museum, Gareth Pugh: Inspired by Balenciaga (London: Culture Shock Media, 2017). Video on display at Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion, accessed August 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxZE0093abo>.
9. Fogg, *Fashion*, 299.
10. Victoria and Albert Museum, Exhibition.
11. Also see Miller, Balenciaga, 38–47.
12. Victoria and Albert Museum, Learning from ‘The Master’: Balenciaga Revealed (London: Culture Shock Media, 2017), accessed August 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qYEUIq7wLI>.
13. Ibid.

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